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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [TD](#)  
SUBJECT: T&T'S PRE-ELECTION POLITICS WARMING UP

REF: A. POS 01066, B. POS 00676, C. POS 000253,

[D](#). POS 01040

[1](#). SUMMARY: A number of recent polls as well as statements by Prime Minister Patrick Manning indicate that Winston Dookeran and his newly-formed Congress of the People should be regarded as serious new actors on the country's political stage. It now seems that the Prime Minister may have decided to hold the next election when it is constitutionally due, no later than January 2008. He may be gambling that by then, his next budget, unlike this year's budget, will win over the electorate to his side; that the fortunes of the United National Congress and the prospects of the Congress of the People may be on a downhill trajectory; that the high crime and violence in the country may have abated; that he may win the environmental argument surrounding the proposed aluminum smelters; and that euphoria over a West Indies win at next year's Cricket World Cup may give him victory at the polls. Whoever wins the election, T&T/US relations will remain friendly, although, as with every other issue, they will be fodder for political point-scoring during the campaign. END SUMMARY.

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REALIGNMENT IN T&T POLITICS  
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[2](#). Two recent opinion polls offer a clear indication that a tectonic shift may be underway in Trinidad and Tobago's domestic political landscape. A third poll, however, continues to reflect the traditional ethnic division between the largely though not exclusively Afro-Trinidadian People's National Movement (PNM), which has been in government since 2001 and the largely though not exclusively Indo-Trinidadian United National Congress (UNC), which has been in opposition since 2001. This sharply-defined duality in T&T's political lineup was disturbed on September 10 when former UNC Political Leader Winston Dookeran and a number of other defectors from the UNC leadership formed the Congress of the People (COP). (Ref A).

[3](#). Dookeran told his September 10 audience that, in establishing the COP, his aim was to provide the voters with a detribalized alternative, a party not based on ethnic divisions but one which would embrace all creeds and races, a party whose mantra would be "build consensus" and whose operating style would be people centered rather than power centered.

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DOOKERAN: SERIOUS ACTOR ON THE POLITICAL STAGE  
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[4](#). Like any new kid on the block, the COP drew considerable immediate attention and not a little enthusiasm. In a September 13 to 16 poll conducted by the respected University of the West Indies (UWI)/Ansa McAl Psychological Research Center, three days after the COP came into being, 37% of the respondents said they would support Winston Dookeran for Prime Minister, if a general election were called immediately; 19% said they would support current Prime Minister Patrick Manning of the PNM; while 11% said they would vote

for Kamla Persad-Bissessar, the UNC parliamentary opposition leader personally chosen for that position by Basdeo Panday, the party's iconic spiritual leader, following his April conviction under the Integrity in Public Life Act.

15. It now appears that this initial burst of pro-Dookeran voter sentiment was just that, an initial burst. By the time an identical UWI/Ansa McAl follow-up survey was conducted on October 11 to 14, Dookeran had slipped dramatically into second place, with only 20% of the survey respondents saying they would vote for him as Prime Minister, in case of an immediate election, while Manning rose to first place, garnering 23% of the respondents. Persad-Bissessar remained in third place with an even lower respondent tally of 9%. It is important to note, however, that, in the October follow-up poll, by far the largest segment of respondents, 39%, represented the combined total of those who would vote for "none of the above" (19%) and those who were simply "undecided" (20%).

16. A third poll, whose results were reported in the press on October 31, was conducted by the North American Caribbean Teachers Association (NACTA) and its findings are substantially different. According to the NACTA poll, the ruling PNM was favored by 44% of respondents, which would give it 31 out of the 41 House of Representatives seats to be contested at the next election; the UNC was favored by 29% of respondents; while the COP ranked third with a tally of 12%, a performance which was nevertheless considered impressive for such a young party. Oddly enough, the same poll reported 61% of respondents as disenchanted with the PNM's current performance in office.

17. In any case, Dookeran's seriousness as a player in the political arena is indicated not only by these poll results. Patrick Manning's own nervousness over the COP's apparent surge of popularity became evident during the PNM's annual convention on October 15. In a somewhat unseemly diatribe before party delegates,

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he was reduced to calling Panday "that jail bird" and nicknaming Dookeran "Mr. Duck and Run". Although high-schoolish campaign-speak of this sort may be common currency in T&T's political culture, what Manning did next verged on illegality. Without naming names, Manning charged that two of Dookeran's COP cohorts had "dirty hands", and warned Dookeran that the long arm of the law would "soon snatch" them.

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SO WHEN WILL THE ELCTION TAKE PLACE  
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18. According to the T&T Constitution, the date of the next general election will be set at the Prime Minister's discretion, but must in no case be set any later than January 2008. At the height of the UNC's disarray, from February through August, (Ref B & C), most commentators believed Manning could safely delay calling the election until the fall of 2007, since by then, the UNC might disintegrate completely. In any case, since Manning's experience with calling a snap election in 1995 turned out to be an electoral disaster, he was unlikely to risk repeating his past mistake.

19. When Winston Dookeran officially defected from the UNC and the first UWI/Ansa McAl poll showed that the COP's popularity had overtaken that of the UNC, some commentators began to wonder if a snap election might, after all, be on the cards. Manning himself did not discourage such speculation, teasing the party faithful and the media at the PNM convention by saying: "the next election could take place tomorrow, or next week, or next month, or next year".

110. However, as the weeks have passed since the PNM convention, it has become increasingly clear that, for a variety of possible reasons, Manning may actually be in no hurry to call an election. One reason may be that the budget he presented to parliament on October 4 failed to give him a boost in the polls; a fall 2007 election would give him one more budget opportunity to sway the electorate in his favor.

111. Two other reasons may have to do with the parties Manning will

face at the polls: for one thing, it may be too early to write off the UNC. If Panday's appeal of his conviction succeeds, the mood and fortunes of the entire Indo-Trinidadian community may revive dramatically. In addition, it may be that, as the UWI/Ansa McAl polls suggest, and the NACTA poll confirms even more strongly, the apparent threat initially posed by Winston Dookeran's formation of the COP seems to have receded somewhat. In part, this may be due to an embarrassing mix up during the important budget debate in parliament when Dookeran was absent from the chamber precisely at the moment he was expected to present the COP's response to the government's proposed budget.

¶12. A fourth reason may be that a number of issues continue to grab the headlines and to cause unhappiness among various segments of the population, whose eventual outcome is yet unknown. These include the persistent high crime and violence plaguing the country, the environmental controversy surrounding the proposed construction of two, possibly three, aluminum smelters, the repeated incidents of incompetence in the delivery of health care services in public hospitals, and the opposition to the draft new constitution commissioned by Patrick Manning, which would give overwhelming powers to an executive president elected by parliament rather than directly by the people. And a fifth and final reason, not at all to be sneered at, may well be that Manning would like to postpone the election till after the Cricket World Cup Tournament of March/April 2007 because, who knows, the West Indian team may actually win the cup and put the electorate in a frame of mind receptive to the reelection of the PNM.

¶13. COMMENT: Although election fever is clearly in the air, there are currently too many unanswered questions and too many issues on the public agenda which have not yet sufficiently crystallized to enable us to make any intelligent predictions. Patrick Manning may have gambled against a snap election, in the hope of a brighter political environment a year from now. All we can do is wait and see if he gambled right. In any case, whoever wins the election, T&T/US relations will remain friendly, although, as with every other issue, they will be fodder for political point-scoring during the campaign. This was already evident when the UNC blasted the Prime Minister's September 5 criticism of US neglect of the Caribbean region (Ref D), claiming he had placed T&T's national security in jeopardy. END COMMENT.

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